

Lessons From The Trial Of The Kensington 6 Before, During And After

In this packet we have included the following information:

- A.) History of the Kensington 6 which are members of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union.
- B.) Chronology of Events
- C.) Lesson's Learned in the Kensington Welfare Rights Union
- D.) Where do we go from here? The continued fight for the community center and how you can join the campaign.
- E.) Newspaper Coverage of the Kensington 6

This packet was prepared by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and we encourage people to duplicate and use this package in whatever way that maybe useful to other people in the struggle for survival. We are also available to come and speak to your organization/church/community about the struggle we went through and the continued struggle we find ourselves in.

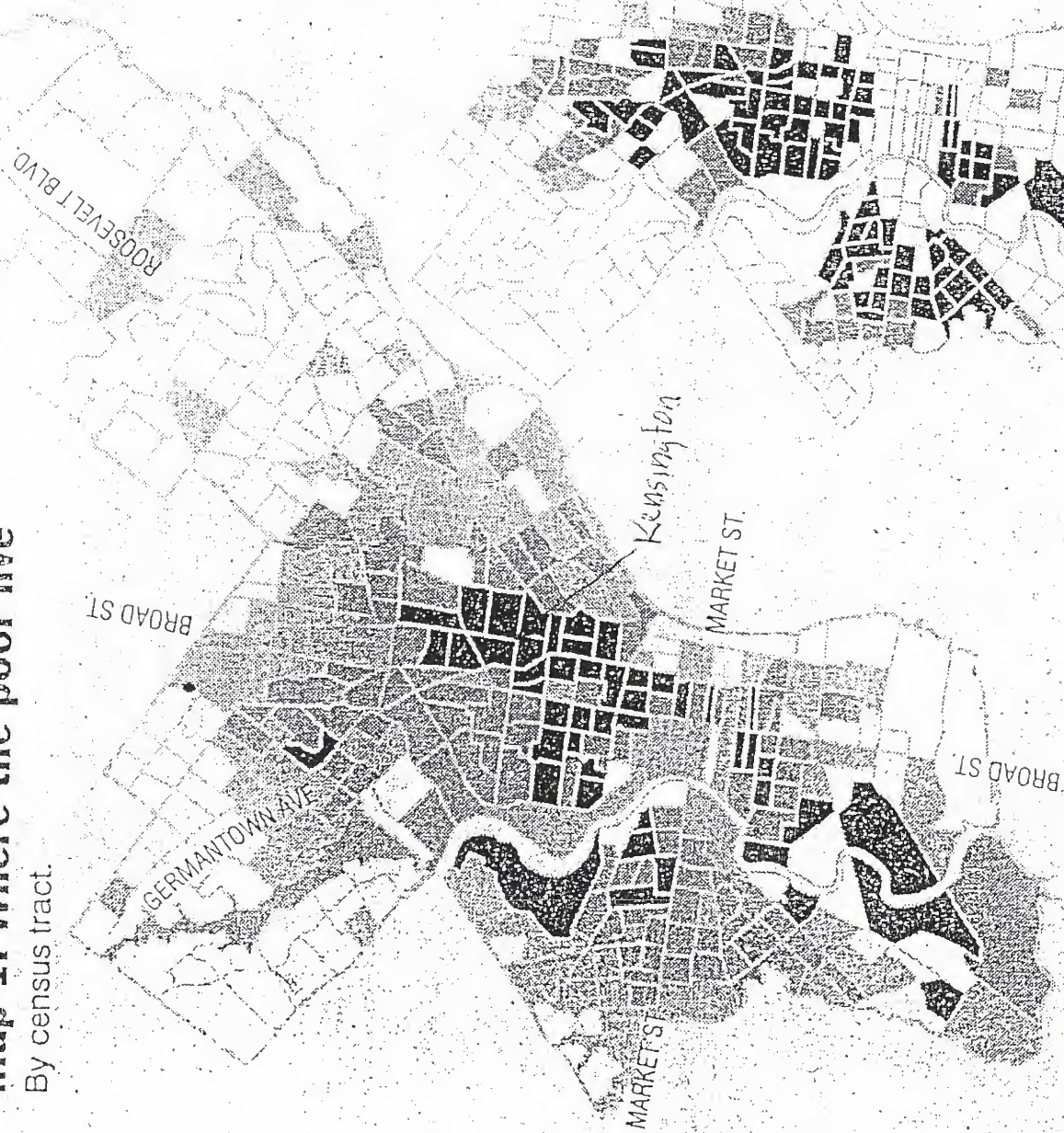
Lastly, We would like to thank everyone for their support before, during and after the trial. Without the support of several organizations and individuals we would not have seen the victory we experienced!

The next victory we are working on is the community center. The struggle continues for a center in which our youth can come together in the community. A center where all the victims of poverty can meet, get some of their basic needs met and make further plans to end poverty in Philadelphia.

This will be the real victory!

Poor and Homeless in Philadelphia

Map 1: Where the poor live
By census tract.



Map 2: Where the homeless used to live
Last known address by census tract.



Index

- None
- Far below average
- Below average
- Above average
- Far above average

(Shading represents the relative concentration of poverty and last known addresses of the homeless.)

SOURCES: Dennis P. Culhane, Chang-Moo Lee and Susan M. Wachter, of the University of Pennsylvania.

Kensington Welfare Rights Union

Up and Out of Poverty NOW!

2838 North Front Street
Philadelphia, PA 19133
(215) 634-5690

HISTORY OF THE KENSINGTON 6

On April 4, 1992 six (6) members of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) were arrested by the Philadelphia police department for acts of civil disobedience. All six are women, five face up to 10 years in jail on trumped up charges. Of the six women, five are mothers, one a teenager who has since had the charges against her dropped. The five mothers are currently or have been on welfare (3 current, 2 former) - all poor.

On the day of the arrests, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union organized a protest march through south Kensington. The protesters marched to organize resistance to the proposed budget cuts in welfare programs being sought by Pennsylvania governor, Robert Casey. They also demanded that an old welfare building, that stands abandoned and used as a crack house, be turned over to the residents of Kensington. They hoped that it would be used as a much needed community center for the children and women of Kensington. Just two years earlier, this building housed the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW).

The 125 demonstrators began the protest march at the new DPW offices located on Lehigh Avenue at Front Street and marched down Kensington Avenue to the corner of Front and York Street. The protester rallied in front of the abandoned, boarded-up building as the six tried to gain entry, only to be prevented each time by the police.

As the demonstrators chanted "Let them in!", the women realized that the front door was not locked and walked inside the building to the cheers of the crowd. Within 15 seconds the police followed the women inside, finding them seated on the floor - arm in arm - only 10 feet from the front entrance. They wanted to begin cleaning the building. All were arrested. The police charges against them ranged from mischievous behavior, and disorderly conduct to criminal conspiracy, criminal trespass, and burglary. The last three of those being felonies which could land these mothers in jail for some time unless this injustice is uncovered.

The court has ordered them rearrested if seen anywhere near the abandoned DPW building. These brave women face trial on October 20, 1992

On April 10, 1992 within a week of the arrests, these six women and other members of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union erected Caseyville - Tent City on a vacant lot one block north of the old DPW building. Caseyville was set up to keep alive the protest and to organize around the issues of the demonstration and to publicize the trial of the Kensington six. The site was a vacant lot located on the corner of Kensington Avenue and Cumberland Street. Caseyville - Tent City had become home to some of our sisters and brothers who are Kensington's homeless and a gathering spot for residents in this poverty stricken community. When resources permitted, the members of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union distributed to the neighborhood from the protest site. Speakouts, rallies, and meetings took place at the tent on a weekly basis. Months later the tent was moved to the cities state building to increase the response to the protest. Since then, the tent has been temporarily discontinued to consintrate more intensely on the Kensington 6 trial.

Through constant meetings, rallies, and fundraisers they have managed to spread the word about this horrible injustice, and gather support for their case. The Up and Out of Poverty movement has been key in gathering national support for the Kensington 6 and other victims of the governments attempt to imprison the struggle for justice and it's leaders.

They are countinuing their fight for the community center and to stop the budget cuts. Civil disobedience is the American way- the way to right what is wrong - to bring justice out of injustice. From the Boston Tea Party to Women's Rights struggles. From the sit down strikes of unions to the Civil Rights Movement. It's the responsibility of all of us who seek justice and a better world for all, to keep these women out of jail.

A 15 minute documentary about these women and their fight is for sale to help raise money for their legal defense.
Some Kind Of War

For more information about the case
or the video contact:

Kensington Welfare Rights Union
2838 North Front Street
Philadelphia, PA 19133
Telephone: (215) 634-5690

ABOUT THE KENSINGTON 6...

Cheri Honkala, age 29—

- formerly homeless, welfare recipient
- mother of one son, two step-daughters
- former high school teacher, currently unemployed
- activist for over 7 years

Diane Coyett, age 45—

- mother of five
- former nursing assistant
- currently receiving AFDC assistance

Sandra Brennan, age 34—

- pregnant, mother of two
- currently receiving AFDC assistance

Debra Weitzmann, age 32--

- mother of two
- former baker, cake decorator
- currently receiving AFDC assistance

Louise Mayberry, age 47—

- mother of four
- formerly homeless
- professional dog groomer, currently unemployed
- activist

Alexis Baptist, age 18—

- recent graduate of Philadelphia High School for Girls
- youth leader, member of several youth organizations
- former welfare recipient

**ALL ARE LOOKING FOR EMPLOYMENT
ABOVE THE MINIMUM WAGE.**

Alexis's Letter to Rappaport

June 4, 1992

Mr. Rappaport,

My name is Alexis Baptist. I was ordered by the justice system to write you a letter of apology.

Kensington is one of many neighborhoods in Philadelphia and across the nation that is being killed by our countries bad economic policies. It is drug, crime, and poverty infested. Many people are living from check to check, and barely making it. The problems in Kensington and the nation are only getting worse. You own abandoned property in that area. The kids that are growing up in those streets, the ones we call our futures, need an alternative to the destitution that surrounds them. They need hope. We wanted to use the old, abandoned welfare building as a community center, there was no indication that the building was private property. We had no intention of violating anyones property. I was arrested for trying to create a place for the future. This letter is more than just an apology, it's an appeal. An appeal for you to help the community by donating the building for a center.

Sincerely,

Alexis Baptist

Chronology Of Events--Nothing Takes Place in A Vacuum

April 1991 Gov. Casey proposes welfare cuts & the Kensington Welfare Rights Union is established.

Petitions, door knocking and discussion groups are held in Kensington to not only discuss problems in Kensington but to come up with solutions to those problems.

Youth meetings are also held. Youth also put forward problems and possible solutions.

Trip is made to Michigan to visit Tent Cities in Michigan. Both youth and adults stay in tent city to meet with leaders there.

A community center that meets the basic needs of both youth and adults is identified as one concrete solution to the communities many problems.

Planning meetings are held. Plan of action is developed.

Location, plan and target are identified.

KWRU meets with the Mayors office. "Proper" channels are taken to secure building unsuccessfully.

Strategy meetings are held at the KWRU.

Continued fight to involve other community groups and residents of Kensington.

Plan is brought to the Philadelphia Up & Out Of Poverty Now - Strategic Roundtable for further examination.

Governor Casey proposes more welfare cuts.

April 4th Anti-Poverty march is held in Kensington. Six members enter the abandoned welfare office owned by Multi-Millionaire Samuel Rappaport. Six women are arrested. This is the first arrest for 5 of the women involved.

April 4th Caseyville (tent city) is also set up next to the abandoned welfare office. Homeless are chased away by drug dealers at gun point.

Caseyville is re-established one block from the vacant welfare office after the Kensington 6 are released from jail with, with a trial date and a court order to stay away from the welfare office.

Food, education & literature are regularly distributed from tent and petitions are signed demanding the vacant welfare office.

Tent is torn down by police twice. Mattress's are also sliced by police within the first 2 weeks of Caseyville.

The day after Easter, Caseyville member, Mike Bussie is set up by police and arrested on the lot on trumped up charges of armed robbery and held in jail for 41 days.

Los Angeles Uprising takes place. Police harassment dies down for a while in Kensington. There is talk everywhere about the King verdict and Los Angeles.

KWRU retreats from tent, to figure out how to deal with Mikes arrest and to re-examine forces working with us and against us.

Potential City Wide Strike. Mayor orders the preparation of the National Guard.

KWRU members and supporters march on Mayors office demanding Bussies release. **Mayors office does nothing!**

Electoral articles begin to dominate the Media. Newspapers continue to talk of FBI's focus in the United States, particularly in gangs.

Caseyville is re-established. More speak outs are held at the tent to try and break the isolation of Kensington. Further relationships are established in the neighborhood. Poor people of all colors, actively begin to work together in the community. **Resources dry up at Caseyville.**

Continued police surveillance. Police appear in gas company cars, phone company trucks. Photographs are continuously taken of people in the Caseyville tent site.

Drug dealers & prostitutes with serious crack & heroine additions begin to takeover Caseyville. The police are no longer harassing Caseyville.

Members & supporters pack courtroom for Bussies hearing. Judge releases Bussie after 41 days for lack of evidence.

21 people are shot at in Kensington in a drive by shooting. A young white male is killed. Racial Violence in Kensington hits the news.

200 white residents of Kensington take to the streets to demand that the Mayor meet with them.

LESSON'S LEARNED BY THE KENSINGTON WELFARE RIGHTS UNION
IN THE FIGHT FOR THE COMMUNITY CENTER

"Then the grasshopper knew it is best to prepare for the days of necessity."

Aesop

Strategy

We learned the importance of Strategic planning. We learned that successful strategic planning had to be reality based. We had to map out the overall course to follow.

The strategic planning involved several meetings. As always it was difficult to go through such a long planning process, because those of us involved had to daily deal with other emerging crises. Such as no money, homeless members having nowhere to sleep at night and etc.

Yet a core group hung on throughout the entire planning process. We had to examine all the forces in this city as well as look at the climate of the country as a whole and make our plans from there. What stage were we at and where could we as a group of homeless & welfare recipients make our main blow?

Our goals were:

1. To break the isolation in Kensington.
2. Begin building a power base in Kensington.
3. Politically educate ourselves through the process.
4. Build collective leadership
5. Come up with concrete solutions to problems faced by the poor of all colors in Kensington and to work together to achieve those solutions.
6. To build our army against poverty and to put faces on the individuals and organizations/institutions that are responsible for the devastation in Kensington.

Mayor meets with over 1000 white residents. KWRU arrives and half of the KWRU group (African American's) have to leave for safety reasons.

Decision is made to take down the tent in Kensington and to focus on the upcoming trial of the Kensington 6.

KWRU participates in continued meetings and demonstrations against the welfare cuts.

Caseyville is set up for one day at the State Building in protest to the Welfare cuts.

On going legal defense meetings are held for the Kensington Six.

Support is given at the National Up & Out of Poverty Now Summit in Detroit Michigan.

Local and National plans are made to support the Kensington Six. People understand the effects of a conviction on the larger movement.

Witch Hunt demonstrations are held at City Hall to call attention to the hunting down of six poor women.

Fundraisers are held for the legal defense.

Petitions, articles and letters of support come in from all around the country.

Six day trial takes place for the Kensington 6 and because of the support, mobilizations and legal defense the Kensington 6 are found not guilty of all charges!

Evaluation meeting is held in the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. Follow up plans are made. Thank you letters are written.

A letter is mailed to the multi-millionaire Samuel Rappaport again requesting the vacant welfare office.

Today committees are being re-established. More people are being drawn into the process and a 6 month plan of research, outreach, education and action are being planned.

April 4th 1993 JOIN US FOR OUR SECOND ANNUAL MARCH & ACTION TO END THE DEVASTATION IN KENSINGTON!

The story continues.....No Community center.....No future for our youth.....NO PEACE!!!!!!!!!!

We had to examine the relationship of forces involved, here are the some of the forces We had to look at;

1. Multi-millionaire Samuel Rappaport
2. Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority
3. Greater Philadelphia First Corporation
4. Organizations in Kensington
5. Police in Kensington
6. District Attorneys Office
7. Churches in Kensington
8. Fidelity Bank
9. The Press
10. Community Developers
11. Gangs
12. Mayor's Administration
13. Kensington Politicians
14. Drug Dealers
15. Prostitutes
16. Business's In Kensington
17. Neighborhood residents
18. The survival network in Philadelphia
19. The survival movement nationally

Tactical Considerations

Specific means for achieving the strategy. We needed concrete goals and objectives. We needed a specific target before we could shoot the arrow.

We found the target. An abandoned welfare office owned by a multi-millionaire, who owned not only the welfare office that was left to rot in Kensington. He owned most of the block as well, as most of center city in Philadelphia.

We decided to have the first ever march against poverty through the streets of Kensington, while at the same time offering a concrete solution to the problems being faced by the people of Kensington. This solution was the formation of a community center, a place where youth could come together as well as adults, to get a combination of recreational and basic needs met.

Overall Strengths & Weakness's

Weakness

Lack of resources
Holes in the planning process
Battle against drugs
More research should have been done
More outreach in Kensington itself

Strengths

Citywide & national support
Press coverage
Collective leadership
Legal teams - collective leadership
New organizations were brought into a relationship with
the survival movement.

We Won!

Overall Summary - Where do we go from Here ?

Kensington, in Philadelphia, PA is like most of large city communities today. It is devastated by the extreme poverty as seen by empty factories, vacant lots, abandoned buildings, drug dealers and prostitutes, as well as the homeless who line many of the streets in Kensington.

There is high unemployment, no jobs and it has the highest school drop out rate in Philadelphia and one of the highest in the nation. The future for youth here is grim, unless something is done.

Some of the white sections of Kensington are known for their racism. Drugs, prostitutes and the police seem to run the neighborhood, protecting interests of other people such as the Samuel Rappaports.

People, banks and business move out daily from Kensington and there appears to be no gentrification plan in sight. The community has been abandoned by not only the banks but by the politicians. Not until 200 people took to the streets and some 21 people were shot at, did the Mayor even make his way down to an auditorium filled with over 1000 people.

Yes, Kensington is on the verge of an explosion! It's residents will not stand for the police terror and the lack of basic resources and regardless of Kensington's history of racism, there is also a growing section of people who are from all colors of the rainbow that are beginning to see themselves as economic equals. They are left to the same plight in Kensington - an inability to pay their rent, feed their kids and to get jobs.

Forming A Powerbase In Kensington

Now is the time of regrouping in the Kensington Welfare Rights Union for planning and continued action. We have learned many lessons in this fight for the community center and we know that the continued fight for such a center will only grow this year.

Our goal is to go deeper into the community. Drawing members into the organization in anyway that they want to contribute. Learning from our mistakes this time and going forward with the lessons we've learned is critically important. Committees are being re-established and we have from now until April 4th 1993 to organize and build for the 2nd annual March against Poverty and For A Community Center in Kensington. Join Us!

E. Newspaper Coverage of the Kensington 6 Trial and the Events surrounding the Case

This section includes a series of articles from the Philadelphia Inquirer and Daily News, the two main papers of the five county Greater Philadelphia region. The Chairman and Publisher of these newspapers sits on the Board of Directors of the Greater Philadelphia First. The Greater Philadelphia First(GPF) consists of over 30 of the largest corporations in the region. An article in *Focus*, a Philadelphia business periodical, reported about this business group being "the most powerful economic and political force in the area." And given the fact that the Greater Philadelphia region represents a third of the population and a third of the Gross Product of the state of Pennsylvania, the GPF wields a tremendous influence throughout the state. The corporations of the GPF are the main beneficiaries of poverty and downsizing in the region. Their influence dominates both the Democratic and Republican Parties.

Upon further analysis it was revealed that the multi-millionaire real estate speculator, Samuel Rappaport stood in the way of some of the major objectives of the economic strategy of the GPF. One objective was the redevelopment and reconstruction of the downtown area around the newly constructed multi-billion dollar Pennsylvania Convention Center. Samuel Rappaport owned major run down and undeveloped properties in this area obstructing this process. He held out from selling these properties speculating for the highest bid.

In a heated struggle against Samuel Rappaport involving of course big stakes and big plans, the Greater Philadelphia First was prepared to utilized any of the most appropriate means it had at its disposal to support whatever effort against him and his outfit. Such an effort was presented by the Kensington 6 Case and the struggle of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union for a community center against this slum lord and speculator.

The tremendous and favorable TV and Print coverage of the struggle and the six days Kensington 6 Trial was partly a product of the collision between Samuel Rappaport and GPF. The daily front page coverage by the Philadelphia Inquirer was clearly an expression of the fact that the GPF saw a coincidence of interests with the KWRU. They used the case as an opportunity to further politically isolate a major enemy of theirs. This inturn enabled the KWRU to accomplish its own objectives by successfully exploiting this conflict between these two gigantic forces, both enemies of the poor.

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GROUPS' PROTEST ACQUIRES LIFE OF ITS OWN
THE PURPOSE IS TO CALL ATTENTION TO POVERTY. AND IN AN AREA OF DRUG
DOINGS AND PROSTITUTION, A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE HAVE FOUND THIS A
HAVEN.

By Pam Belluck, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The man sitting by the corner pay phone looked up briefly from the glass tube he was fumbling with.

"Do you know what I'm doing?" he asked the person punching the phone buttons. "I'm smoking crack."

A woman stalked up, energetically unbuttoning her green blouse, twitching impatiently as she waited her turn at the bench outside the crack house.

It was a Saturday afternoon at Kensington Avenue and Cumberland Street.

But just across the street, in a rubble-strewn vacant lot, a handful of people have found a small haven.

They have found refuge by helping out in an anti-poverty protest that community groups set up two weeks ago. The encampment is dubbed Caseyville in mock tribute to the governor's welfare policies.

There is John Chaney, 39, who grew up tutoring future basketball star Dave Cowens at a Boston technical school they attended, but wound up spending a few years doing methamphetamine and marijuana. He's off drugs now, but he recently lost his home and began sleeping in cars and abandoned houses in Kensington.

There is white-haired, Louise Cruz, 62, who has a place to live, but spends most of her hours walking the streets of Kensington. She doesn't always know where she is. "I forget things," she said.

There is Tony Johnston, who said he used to sell drugs at 15th and Poplar and, until very recently, used to do them, too. He lost his apartment last summer when he lost his construction job. He now lives in the office of one of the community groups and has adopted its mission as a way to stay out of trouble.

"I've been tempted to go back to doing drugs - crack, reefer, drink," said Johnston, 35, "but the struggle keeps me clean so I don't get into the drugs and alcohol. This way, I don't go out with the fellas for beer and such."

"The struggle" is a few signs and tables that were put up April 10 on the vacant lot at the southwest corner of Kensington and Cumberland. It was started and sponsored by a gaggle of housing and community groups whose demands range from the local - a community center to be set up in an abandoned welfare office on Front Street - to the large - a stop to Gov. Casey's proposed welfare cuts.

Caseyville had a tent, where Chaney and others slept at night until the police tore it down five days ago. It had an oil-drum fire fueled by a big pile of scrap wood, but the Fire Department stamped it out on the second night.

Police say that the Caseyville members are trespassing on city property and that officers will continue to take action against them. Police spokeswoman Theresa Young said this kind of "interim housing" poses "health issues and sanitation issues" that the Police and Licenses and Inspections Departments have to deal with.

The protesters accused the police of going after Caseyville more aggressively than they go after drug users and prostitutes on the block. Young said all those are problems that need to be addressed.

Caseyville has lived on and has attracted a group of people with nowhere else to go, or certainly nowhere better.

Some have become ad hoc activists, wearing promotional buttons or T-shirts and helping publicize the agendas of groups, such as Dignity Housing, Up and Out of Poverty Now, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, and something called Operation Pennsylvania Storm. These groups bring toys and clothing to the Caseyville regulars, who in turn dole them out to the community.

John Chaney drifted to Caseyville when he got kicked out of a '76 Plymouth he was sleeping in.

He has scraggly brown hair that brushes his shoulders, a beard streaked with gray, and skin that is swarthy and cracked. His hands and fingernails are caked with dirt, he is missing almost all of his upper front teeth, and there is a bloodied scab on the bridge of his nose.

He said he became homeless after his wife of 17 years left him last year, accusing him of trying to drown her in the bathtub. He said he has always worked and is trying hard to find a job.

"This kind of struggle keeps me away from the bad environment," said Chaney. "Actually, it doesn't keep us away, it puts us right in the middle of it. But it puts us so we can laugh at it."

Jimmy Faulkner, 33, is Caseyville's fixer. He stays in a house nearby, cruises the neighborhood on a bright yellow bicycle and prides himself on "knowing everybody and getting them to like me and do things for me."

He helped Caseyville get rakes and shovels to clear the lot, boxes and wood for the fire, and permission to use the restroom in a Vietnamese restaurant down the street.

"I got mad when they stopped staying overnight after the tent went down," Faulkner said. "I got to like them; it's like one big family."

Louise Cruz seems to like the family aspect too, even though she doesn't seem to completely understand why they are there. On Saturday, she walked cheerfully up to Caseyville's tables strewn with hand-scrawled anti-poverty posters.

"I know you all as soon as I see you all, but I forget you as soon as I walk away," she said. Someone asked her how she was making out.

"I keep forgetting to try to get welfare," she said. "I keep forgetting to try to get Social Security. I forget things."

They picked a pretty active corner for Caseyville. Besides the crack house across the street, there are prostitutes lining the block, their calls barely audible over the persistent rumbling of the El train directly overhead.

Act Up, the gay-rights and anti-AIDS group, controls the sidewalk on Saturday mornings, doling out hypodermic needles, bleach and condoms.

Last weekend, Caseyville became a staging ground for a news conference by local chapters of national groups who were seizing an opportunity to get some attention for their agenda. They brought clothes and toys to distribute.

They wore a lot of organizational hats.

"My first name is the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless and my last name is Operation Pennsylvania Storm," said one woman.

Her real name was Diane Johnson, and she and others talked vigorously about the desperation of Kensington and other places like it, the need for good health care, education and housing.

But some of the Caseyville regulars drifted off when the troops arrived.

Darryl Grier was one. He has been keeping the vigil at Caseyville because it's a good place for scavenging. On Saturday, Grier picked up about \$7 worth of copper wire and roof shingles from the Caseyville lot.

As the housing groups arrived for their event, Grier wandered off with his shopping cart. "Maybe I'll find some old toilets to take to the scrap yard," he said.

Caption:

PHOTO (2)

1. At the vacant lot in Kensington, John Chaney, who has become one of the regulars, watches over the distribution of toys and clothing brought in by various groups. (The Philadelphia Inquirer / J. KYLE KEENER)
2. Hand-lettered signs mark the lot at Kensington and Cumberland, site of the anti-poverty protest. (The Philadelphia Inquirer / J. KYLE KEENER)

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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

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SHE STRUGGLES AGAINST POVERTY - FOR HERSELF AND OTHERS CHERI HONKALA HAS BEEN POOR AND HOMELESS. SHE'S SO INTENT ON ELIMINATING BOTH, SHE'S RISKING JAIL.

By Kimberly J. McLarin, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Cheri Honkala faces prison for breaking into an abandoned building to turn it into a community center, but that's not her immediate concern.

Poverty is.

Poverty and homelessness. The grinding despair of simply not having, the painful humiliation of having to scrimp for every piece of food and piece of clothing and every little pleasure that makes a life a life. If not her own poverty, then that of someone she knows. If not someone she knows, then that of someone she doesn't know.

Poverty in general possesses her.

In the last two years Honkala has watched six young friends slip into the abyss of drugs or jail or suicide. As a member of the **Kensington Welfare Rights Union**, an anti-poverty group, she sees despair in the faces of the homeless people who gather each night at a neighborhood tent encampment dubbed Caseyville in mock tribute to the governor's welfare policies. She blames it all on her old nemesis: poverty.

"They don't see any hope," she said. "It's those kind of experiences that make the thought of going to jail less frightening."

Honkala, 29 and a veteran of dozens of anti-poverty protests, expected to be arrested in April when she broke into an abandoned welfare office and tried to claim it for poor people. But she didn't expect to be hit with a battery of charges that includes burglary, disorderly conduct and criminal trespass - a felony.

She is one of six women arrested after that protest, sponsored by the Welfare Rights Union. It began as a march that drew 125 people and ended with the women breaking into the former welfare office. They wanted to turn the building, which sits chained and empty, into a community center for women and children.

Police said the women were arrested after they broke into the building, sat on the floor, locked arms and began chanting. Honkala said the women intended to start cleaning the building but were prevented from doing so by the police.

Ronald Cole, Honkala's attorney, said his client and the other women turned down a plea-bargain offer by the District Attorney's Office. A trial has been scheduled for September.

If the women are convicted on all charges, the penalties will be stiff. For example, conviction on the burglary charge carries a maximum of 10 years in prison.

Their attorneys say it's not likely that the women will receive the maximum sentences. They

also say it is unusual for nonviolent protesters to be slapped with such serious charges.

William Davol, a spokesman for the District Attorney's Office, said officials would not comment on the case since it was continuing.

Attorney David Rammler, who is representing Louise Mayberry, one of the six women, said he had represented clients in similar cases who were usually charged with summary or minor offenses.

"This is far and away the most serious charge I've ever seen on what is obviously a community organizing political action event," he said.

Deborah Weitzmann, another of the women charged, said she could not believe it either.

"The people that squatted in (there) were never arrested," Weitzmann said. "The people who did drugs in it were never arrested. Here we're trying to win a community center and we're arrested.

"The system," Weitzmann said, "is so screwed up."

*

Honkala grew up in Minneapolis in poverty, the daughter of an abused and abandoned woman who went on welfare to stay alive. At first Honkala blamed her mother for the conditions in which they lived. But when Honkala became a mother herself at age 16, something happened.

"I realized my mother was doing everything she possibly could to provide for us and have a decent home for us," Honkala said, "but the barriers were just too great."

Honkala finished high school and began raising her son, sometimes by working and sometimes with the aid of public assistance. It was during one of those stretches on welfare that she got her first taste of community activism.

Minnesota state officials were proposing major cuts in welfare grants. Honkala began talking to other women she met in the welfare office, asking them what they planned to do if the cuts went through. Soon the women were meeting. And after that they were organizing. Then they protested in front of government offices and filled the gallery at the state legislature.

When the budget cuts were averted, Honkala tasted victory. She was convinced that people could make a change if they banded together.

Honkala began working for a nonprofit homeless organization, but lost her job when the group ran out of money. She couldn't pay her rent. And when one day she came home to find an eviction notice on her door, she and her 10-year-old son had no place to go but the street.

For 18 months she and her son scraped by, camping out in homeless shelters or living in abandoned houses.

"It was just devastating," she said. "The biggest thing I had to do with my son was to teach him that he wasn't a bad person because he was poor."

Throughout 1990 and 1991, Honkala was involved in demonstrations for a variety of causes in Minneapolis and arrested several times. During one takeover of an unoccupied house,

she chained herself to a couch in an effort to impede police.

Honkala's story has a fairy-tale ending. While volunteering in a house squatting project, she met and married an activist from Philadelphia and moved here to be with him. Even so, she said that she and her husband, a union organizer, were just "a paycheck or two away from being homeless." And she knows that most homeless women can't expect the same kind of happy rescue.

"People like to paint us as lazy and irresponsible and that somehow we didn't manage our money right," she said. "But I know the reality. And more and more people are seeing the reality every day."

"Seeing friends of mine living on the streets of Philadelphia and struggling to come up with a dollar to get their prescriptions . . . just gives me enough rage when I wake up to spend my entire day trying to do something to change what I see going on in this country," Honkala said.

She sees a growing gulf between rich and poor in the nation, with the poor being increasingly ignored.

*

Anywhere from four to 35 people a night show up at the Caseyville encampment at the corner of Kensington and Cumberland to sleep inside or outside the tent that stands under a tree, or to get in on the free food provided by the **Kensington Welfare Rights Union** and other anti-poverty groups.

The encampment was set up in April by various anti-poverty groups, such as Up and Out of Poverty Now and the Welfare Rights Union. They are demanding everything from a stop to Gov. Casey's proposed welfare cuts to the community center in the abandoned welfare office.

One hot day this month a man, who identified himself only as Chicago, kept watch over the tent from inside. Chicago, 24 but looking older, said he hadn't held a steady job in his adult life.

"All my life I've been poor," he said. "No matter what I try to do to make it different, it was always obstacles to bring me back down."

Chicago said he saw the Caseyville protest as his chance to change his life while making a difference in society's structure.

"It's something positive to do with my time," he said, then crawled outside the tent to sit in a chair and survey the neighborhood around him.

The governor has proposed trimming \$138 million in cash grants and Medicaid from the budget for fiscal 1993. Negotiations on the budget, which is scheduled to take effect Wednesday, were still under way last week. But if Casey's proposed cuts are approved, the impact would fall upon general-assistance recipients, whose benefits are paid solely by state dollars.

Casey has also proposed consolidating cash grants for individual recipients who share a household, eliminating medical services such as routine dental and eye care, and limiting coverage for over-the-counter and prescription drugs, doctors' visits and health-care nurses.

Honkala and other anti-poverty activists fear the cuts will increase homelessness and force thousands of struggling people over the brink.

"Myself being a former homeless person I just know what these cuts are going to do to people's lives," Honkala said. "It's going to kill them, and that's not rhetoric. That's not an exaggeration."

Local residents have reacted to the encampment with a mixture of indifference and support. One woman brings hot tea to those gathered late at night. Others have lent the campers rakes and shovels to clean up the lot. But the prostitutes who line the block sometimes jeer at the squatters, and the drug dealers who operate in the neighborhood have thrown bricks at the group.

Just around the corner, on Front Street, sits the abandoned welfare office the women wanted to convert into a community center. Its front doors are chained shut in what residents say is an unsuccessful effort to keep out intruders. The office has been vacant for almost two years.

Weitzmann, one of the women arrested, said she wanted to see the building turned into a community center because she remembered her own days as a teenager, hanging out on the gray-toned streets of Kensington, looking and hoping and waiting for something to do.

She almost never found anything. Not anything productive anyway.

"There is nothing in Kensington," she said. "There is nothing for kids to do but just hang on the streets and get in trouble. I don't want other kids to do that. I'm hoping I can save another kid from doing drugs."

Meanwhile, Honkala's immediate concerns are lobbying to stop the proposed welfare cuts, keeping things together at Caseyville by raising money for a new tent and trying to scrounge up enough money for trash bags, and encouraging people to come out to the encampment despite the heavy police attention.

And not returning to homelessness. Never returning to homelessness.

"I don't ever want to go through being that poor ever again in my life," she said. "I'm poor now. But I will not return to those streets."

Caption:

PHOTO (1)

1. Cheri Honkala adjusts a banner as Chicago (right) relaxes at the Caseyville encampment at the corner of Kensington and Cumberland. Caseyville was set up in April by anti-poverty groups. (The Philadelphia Inquirer / RON CORTES)

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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Friday, October 23, 1992
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KENSINGTON SIX DEFEND OCCUPATION OF BUILDING THE DEFENSE SAYS THEY ASSERTED THE COMMUNITY'S RIGHTS. THE PROSECUTOR SEES INJURY TO PROPERTY RIGHTS.

By Amy S. Rosenberg, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

On April 4, the women who now call themselves the Kensington Six occupied a vacant, dilapidated former welfare office they sought to transform from a blight on the neighborhood into a community center.

They held a rally, marched to the site and entered the building. There, they linked arms and sat down until police arrested them.

Yesterday, these women - members of the *Kensington Welfare Rights Union* (KWRU) - found themselves sitting in a courtroom facing a jury that must decide whether the women are guilty of criminal trespass, disorderly conduct and conspiracy.

To the commonwealth, the trial is about a simple matter: breaking the law of private property.

"There is no one here who is to contest their right to assemble or that their cause is not a worthy one," Assistant District Attorney Pamela Carlos told the jury of nine women and three men. "The right to assemble and march does not give one the right to forcibly enter another person's property."

But to the five women on trial - the sixth, Alexis Baptist, now 18, was adjudicated as a juvenile - the trial is about so much more.

"We were trying to get a building to help the poor, to get kids off the streets," Diane Coyett, KWRU president, said in an interview. "Is there any kind of justice in America?"

In addition to Coyett, 45, the other women on trial are: KWRU director *Cheri Honkala*, 29; Louise Mayberry, 47; Deborah Weitzmann, 32, and Sandra Brennan, 34.

Defense attorneys told the jury the women were seeking to do for their community what the state welfare system had failed to do.

The building at 2400 N. Front St. had once been occupied by the state Department of Public Welfare. But for the 18 months prior to the protest, the building had been empty - a three-story, block-long hulk scarred by graffiti, boarded-up windows, trash and drug activity.

Defense attorneys say the activists believed the building had been abandoned by the state, and not, as it turned out, privately owned by real estate mogul Samuel Rappaport.

"They were asserting the rights of the community on behalf of mothers who care about the community," Mark Mungello, attorney for Coyett, told the jury. "They were trying to prevent their children from coming under the influence of drug dealers. The community should be able to look for a place to have a food bank, to have a G.E.D. center."

Carlos, the prosecutor, told the jury the women were warned over and over again not to enter the building. Once they did, she said, the police spent more than an hour trying to persuade them to leave. When the women refused, officers arrested them and carried them out of the building.

Mungello argued that the women's activities were justified under the law because they were designed to prevent a greater harm - the harm caused by an abandoned building overrun with drug addicts, a neighborhood beset by crime, poverty, inadequate housing and children without adequate schools or recreation.

"This was a self-help program," said Ronald Cole, attorney for Honkala. "This rally was to change the property from a blight to a positive resource."

Yesterday, Jan Singer testified that he managed the property at 2400 N. Front St. for Rappaport. He said the building had been locked, and an alarm system in place. He said that there was a sign advertising the property for sale or for rent, and that he had shown the property a week or two before the protest.

He also testified that after the protest, he found the door damaged from what he believed was a forcible entry. The alarm system, he said, needed to be reset.

The trial will continue today before Common Pleas Court Judge D. Webster Keogh.

Observing yesterday was Alexis Baptist, a KWRU administrator, who was 17 when she was arrested on April 4. In April, she was ordered by a Family Court judge to write an apology to Rappaport and attend a class in the law of civil disobedience. In her letter, Baptist made this plea:

You own abandoned property in that area. The kids that are growing up in those streets, the ones we call our futures, need an alternative to the destitution that surrounds them. They need hope. We wanted to use the old, abandoned welfare building as a community center. . . I was arrested for trying to create a place for the future. This letter is more than an apology, it's an appeal. An appeal for you to help the community by donating the building for a center. Sincerely, Alexis Baptist.

Rappaport has not responded.

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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

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OFFICER TELLS WHY HE HELD KENSINGTON 6 PROPERTY RIGHTS ASIDE, HE SAID, THEIR ACTIONS ENDANGERED THEMSELVES AND THE PUBLIC.

By Amy S. Rosenberg, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

A police civil affairs officer testified yesterday that he arrested six welfare activists on Sept. 4 only after trying for more than an hour to persuade the women to leave a vacant welfare office they sought to claim as a community center.

"They all sat on the floor singing 'We Shall Overcome' and linking arms," Officer Howard Jones testified at the trial of the women who now call themselves the Kensington Six. They are charged with criminal trespass, disorderly conduct and conspiracy.

"We told them over 20 times to leave," he said. "We said we'll talk to the owner of the building and let him know what would happen. We offered them jobs. . . . They were carried out of the building because they refused to get up and walk."

On trial are five members of the **Kensington Welfare Rights Union**: Cheri Honkala, 29; Diane Coyett, 45; Sandra Brennan, 34; Louise Mayberry, 47, and Deborah Weitzmann, 32. The sixth, Alexis Baptist, 18, was adjudicated as a juvenile a few weeks after her arrest.

Baptist was ordered to write a letter of apology to the building's owner, real estate mogul Samuel Rappaport. She did so, making a plea to Rappaport to donate the decrepit building to the struggling community. He has not responded.

Jones testified on the second day of the trial before Common Pleas Court Judge D. Webster Keogh that he believed the women's activities - which began with a rally and a march and ended with the occupation of the building at 2400 North Front Street - posed a safety threat to him and to the public.

"They were wearing army fatigues and standing in front of the old public assistance building," Jones testified under questioning by Assistant District Attorney Gina Garrett-Jackson. "The chants got louder and louder: 'We're not going to take this anymore. We are going to take this building.'"

Jones testified that he and other officers physically pulled two of the women down from a ladder they had propped against the building.

He said he believed they were trying to enter the building through a second-floor window; the women have contended that they were simply trying to hang the banner of their group on the building.

He said the group's leader, Honkala, then ran out to the street and shouted over a bullhorn to a crowd of between 100 and 200 people.

"She ran yelling into the street saying, 'We are going to take this building. We're going to take it now,' " he said.

The women then somehow entered the building and refused to leave, he said. They were

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then carried out of the buildings.

The trial will resume Monday.

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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Thursday, October 29, 1992
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KENSINGTON PROTESTERS ACQUITTED THEY TRIED TO CLAIM A BUILDING FOR A COMMUNITY CENTER. IT WAS VACANT. THEY SAID ABANDONED.

By Amy S. Rosenberg, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

With their children watching, fingers crossed and holding their breath, five Kensington welfare activists were acquitted yesterday of all charges stemming from their attempt to transform a vacant one-time welfare office from a neighborhood blight into a community center.

One by one, tears welling in their eyes, the women of the *Kensington Welfare Rights Union* - Diane Coyett, 45, *Cheri Honkala*, 29, Louise Mayberry, 47, Deborah Weitzmann, 32, and Sandra Brennan, 34 - stood before the jury to be pronounced not guilty.

The charges - lodged April 4 after the women entered the building, locked arms, sat down and sang "We Shall Overcome" - could have sent them to prison for up to 10 years.

Gasps and barely suppressed cries of joy filled the courtroom as jury foreman Gerald Gorrell read the first of 15 verdicts of not guilty - for two felony counts of criminal trespass and one count of conspiracy for each woman. The jury had deliberated for less than three hours.

"This has restored my faith in people - real people in the community," Honkala said, still in tears. "If you stand up to something - even something as big as a millionaire - sometimes it can work."

Charges of disorderly conduct were dismissed by the judge midway through the trial.

The women testified that they thought the building at 2400 N. Front St. was abandoned public property and that they had no intention of committing a crime, a defense that jury members said they accepted in reaching their verdict. A flier distributed by the women before the protest called for a "nonviolent takeover of an abandoned building."

The building is owned by real estate mogul Samuel Rappaport, who was blasted by defense attorneys throughout the five-day trial for neglecting a once-stately building in a neighborhood in desperate need of a community center.

"The evidence shows they were trying to prevent the criminal activity from going on in that building," Assistant Public Defender LaRue Worthy, who represented Weitzmann, said in closing arguments.

"At some point, you have to say Sam Rappaport no longer owned this building," she said. "It was owned by the drug addicts, the drug dealers and those engaged in criminal activity."

Because Rappaport is a friend of and campaign contributor to District Attorney Lynne M. Abraham, the District Attorney's Office had offered to turn the prosecution over to the state Attorney General's Office for prosecution. Common Pleas Court Judge D. Webster Keough declined the offer.

Yesterday, spokesman Bill Davol of the District Attorney's Office said the defendants had
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turned down plea bargains that would have given them probation.

"The defendants demanded their jury rights - they wanted a trial and they got one," Davol said. "We put our case in court and the jury decides."

Throughout the trial, the women and their supporters said they could not believe the justice system would brand them as the criminals, but not the drug addicts who occupied the building or the property owners who leave buildings throughout their neighborhood to rot.

Yesterday, the women vowed to continue their fight on behalf of the poor and powerless.

"We knew the charges were ridiculous," said Alexis Baptist, 18, who was also arrested April 4. She and the five women make up the group now called the Kensington Six. Baptist was adjudicated as a juvenile in the case.

As part of her adjudication, Baptist wrote a letter of apology to Rappaport in which she pleaded with him to donate the building to the community. She said he never responded.

The ground floor of the nearly block-long building has since been rented for \$250 a month to Luis Cruz, 54, who said yesterday he will open a store this week buying and selling used furniture, clothing and appliances.

Cruz said in an interview that he has spent about \$7,000 on repairs to the building, and has more to do. He said cleared the trash from the building, but the windows on the upper floors are still broken, and the building is covered with graffiti. Cruz said he found hypodermic needles on the second floor.

Gina Garrett-Jackson and Pamela Carlos, assistant district attorneys, had argued to the jury that the case centered not on the worthiness of the women's cause, but on the sanctity of private property.

"Let's get one thing straight," Carlos told the jury in closing statements. "This is not the Commonwealth versus the **Kensington Welfare Rights Union**. This is not the Commonwealth versus self-help, or homelessness, or poverty. They are not on trial for who they are, only for their actions."

The defense initially had sought to argue that the women's activities were justified because of the condition of the building and of their neighborhood; that they were seeking to prevent the greater harm of drug activity, blight and crime in the only way they thought would work.

But Judge Keough refused to allow that defense. Instead, the defense focused on whether the women had criminal intent when they occupied the building, and whether they believed the property had been abandoned. The women testified that they assumed the building, once occupied by the Department of Public Welfare, but unused for 18 months before the protest, was public property.

The prosecution argued that there was evidence - a For Rent/For Sale sign, security decals and an alarm system - that indicated the property had not been abandoned.

Rappaport, the owner, was not called to testify; instead, the prosecution called Jan Singer, who said he manages some 50 of Rappaport's properties. He said he had visited the building two weeks before the protest, and had been showing the property to prospective tenants. He said he had made an attempt to maintain the building.

PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

Thursday, October 29, 1992
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Page: 19

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JURY FORGIVES THEIR TRESPASSES

by Kathy Brennan, Daily News Staff Writer

After a trial straight out of "L.A. Law," complete with speeches on social issues such as poverty and urban blight, a jury yesterday acquitted five women who had occupied an empty building in Kensington with the intention of turning it into a community center.

"This trial was a waste of taxpayers' dollars," said Cheri Honkala, 29, a former social worker and one of the defendants. "The police allow heroin- shooting to go on there, prostitutes to work there, but they arrest us. We were going to go in with mops and brooms and start a youth program in that building."

The problem, as Assistant District Attorney Pamela Carlos pointed out during the six-day trial, was that the building had not been abandoned. The three-story, boarded-up hulk on North Front Street near Kensington Avenue belonged to real-estate developer Samuel Rappaport, she said, and the women had no right to trespass.

"The commonwealth cannot excuse the behavior of these defendants because of their beliefs," she said in her closing arguments to the jury.

The women, all Kensington residents who belong to the Kensington Welfare Rights Union to aid welfare recipients, had organized a march of almost 200 people on the building. The April 4 march had been more reminiscent of the '60s than the '90s.

Despite police warnings not to enter, they went in and stayed for more than an hour before being arrested and charged with criminal trespass and conspiracy.

The women claimed during the trial before Common Pleas Judge D. Webster Keogh that they hadn't known that the building, which had been empty for 18 months, was owned by Rappaport. They said they had thought it was abandoned.

The jury deliberated for fewer than three hours.

"There was no way we could convict without reasonable doubt," said jury foreman Gerald Gorrell.

Acquitted were Honkala; Diane Coyett, 45; Louise Mayberry, 47; Deborah Weitzmann, 32, and Sandra Brennan, 34. A sixth woman, Alexis Baptist, 18, was also arrested, but was separated from the others because she was a juvenile at the time; charges against her were later dropped.

Lawyers for the defendants compared their clients' actions with those of civil-rights protesters in the '60s.

"Whether you're sitting in a luncheonette in Selma, Alabama, in 1961 . . . or walking into a building in Kensington, you are exercising the license and privilege dictated by the way our society functions," argued one of the lawyers, David Rammler, representing Mayberry, a mother of four. "In our society, the squeaky wheel gets the grease."

KENSINGTON 6

SEEK JUSTICE



Ceri Okelberry

Diane Sandy Cheri Alexis Debbie Louise

On April 4, 1992 these six women were arrested by the the Philadelphia Police Department. All are members of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. Five are mothers who face trumped-up felony charges, for entering an abandoned building, in efforts to turn it into a community center and to stop the welfare cuts. They face jail time on these trumped-up charges.

THEY STAND TRIAL AT CITY HALL ON SEPTEMBER 29, 1992

Funds and organized support are desperately needed for their legal defense. Justice is never guaranteed. It must be fought for!

UP AND OUT OF POVERTY, NOW!

Contact: Justice for the Kensington Six

KWRU HISTORY SERIES: Two Parts

Discussion Points and Concepts

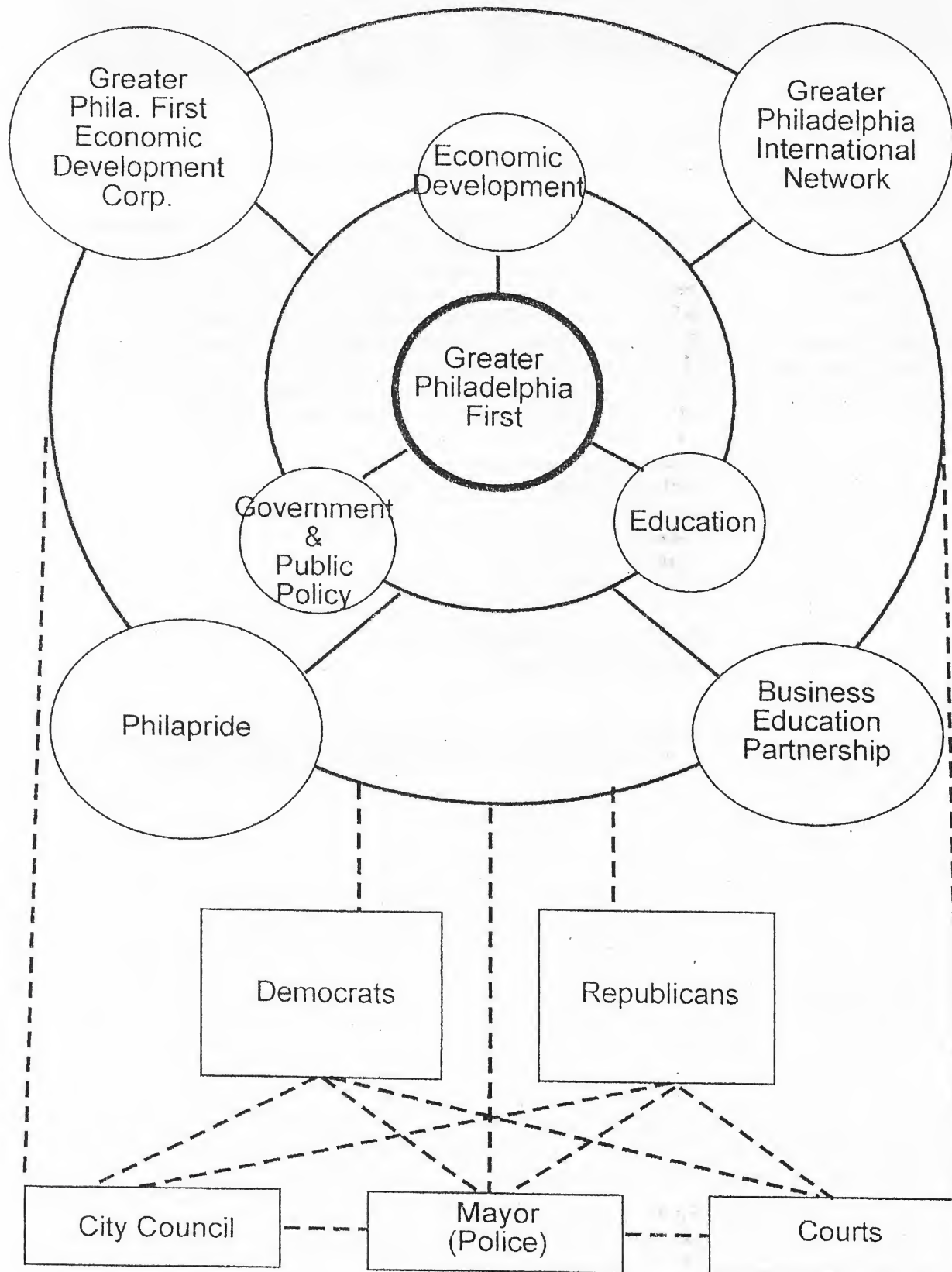
I. The "Big Picture"

1. Who are the Mice and Cats in Philadelphia and in the country?
2. Why didn't it matter what the color of the cat?
3. Why was the platforms(or programs) of the cats and the laws they passed for Mouseland were not good for mice?
4. Why is the words of the former welfare recipient in the Greater Philadelphia Works' Commercial an example of 'cats sounding like a mice but eating like a cat?'
5. Why did the cats jail the "one little mice?"
 - different estimate of the problems in Mouseland
 - different platform(or program) for solution
 - who leads?
6. What is meant be statement, "...you can lock up a mice or a man but you can't lock up an idea? What does this say about the strengths and weaknesses in the experiences of the KWRU and the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign?

II. Some Kind of War

1. Why was it important to build a "Power Base" in Kensington, North Philadelphia?
2. Why was the proposal of a Community Center important organizing and consciousness-raising?
3. Why were the welfare mothers prepared to get arrested?
4. What was the significance of them being white and black, young and old?
5. Discuss the role of writing and the songs inspired by the Kensington 6 Case.
6. What is the kind of the war that is being fought today and how in the Case did the KWRU play with the forces arrayed against it and work with the forces having the same or similar needs and concerns as the KWRU?

Power in Philadelphia





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Greater Philadelphia First
1818 Market Street
Suite 3510
Philadelphia, PA 19103-3681
Telephone: 215-575-2200
Facsimile: 215-575-2222

Shawn Farr, Acting Executive Director
Email: sfarr@gpfirst.com

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